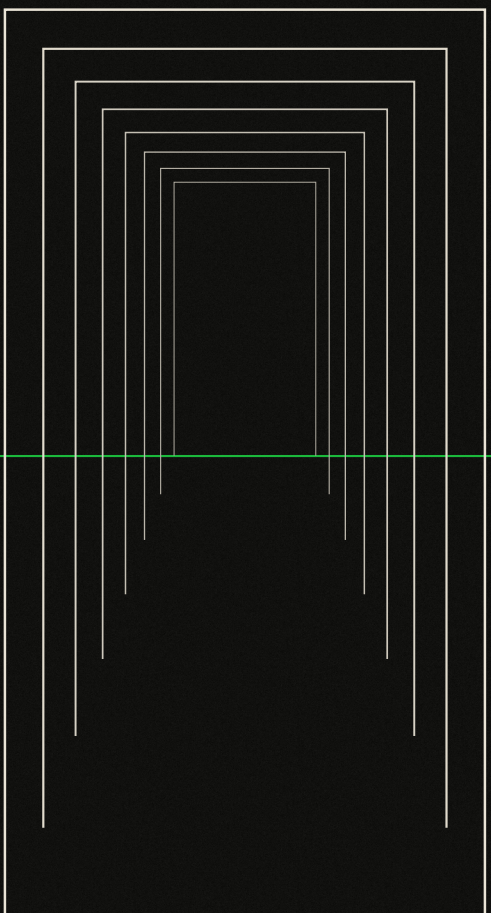
THE SIMULATION HOLDS

On Reality, the Self, and the Fictions That Run Us



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The epigraph is a simulacrum.

For the witness.

The dream required a witness.
So it built one, set it inside, and called it the waking.

Ecclesiastes

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Preface

Most people believe they are perceiving reality. They are running a model instead, assembled from sensory data, processed by a nervous system shaped across four hundred million years of evolutionary pressure toward survival, filtered through language they did not choose, interpreted inside a cultural framework they inherited. By the time a perception arrives at consciousness, it has cleared so many processing layers that calling it a direct report on the world would be foolish.

What follows is an attempt to map a circuit of related problems I cannot stop returning to: what reality actually is, what the self is that claims to perceive it, why humans press obsessively toward objective truth, and what all of this means for the age we're living through.

Dylan Allman

The Apparatus Problem

There is a version of the question "does reality exist?" that people find annoying. It sounds like a question you marvel at with your chooms at 2am while high. Most people never return to it. Sit with that dismissal. The annoyance arrives before any argument is made, and that suggests the question may be doing something threatening. The mind reaches for the exit because the exit is already installed. It's a reflex that protects stability before stability has even been questioned. Most of what the mind does to maintain its sense of solid ground happens beneath the threshold of any awareness, fast enough that it feels like common sense.

Everything you have ever experienced arrived through an apparatus. Eyes, ears, skin, proprioception. Sensory organs transduce physical events into electrochemical signals. The brain processes those signals into qualia, the felt quality of experience. The redness of red. The sharpness of cold. None of these are properties of the external world. The wavelength of light that registers as red doesn't contain redness. Your visual cortex constructs it, fast enough and consistently enough that the construction feels like pure detection.

Kant formalized this in 1781 in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. We never encounter the thing-in-itself, what Kant called the *Ding an sich*. We encounter phenomena, the world as already transformed by human cognitive architecture. Whether that architecture tracks whatever lies beneath it accurately is a question the architecture cannot answer from inside itself.

Thomas Metzinger pressed further in 2003 in *Being No One* with the concept of the phenomenal self-model. The brain generates a real-time simulation of itself and renders it as though from a first-person vantage. What you experience as "seeing the world" is the brain's model of seeing the world. The experience carries no certificate of correspondence with anything outside the model. A self-model that flagged itself as a self-model would be useless for the rapid, confident action that survival requires, so it presents itself as a transparent window.

A flag is dyed fabric. It's just pigment arranged in a geometric pattern. A person who had never encountered the concept would see exactly that: color, shape, cloth. A child who knows flags but not this one would see a symbol-shaped thing, legible as a category without content. A citizen of the country it represents sees none of this. They see the nation, its history, what the symbol has been made to carry, and they feel something before any deliberate interpretation occurs, before any choice is made to feel it. The emotional freight arrives with the perception rather than after it. This is the transparency Metzinger describes. The processing layer has gone so deep it

precedes the experience of seeing. The citizen cannot look at the flag and see cloth first, then choose to assign meaning. The meaning is installed prior to the looking. Three people, identical retinal input, three entirely different realities. None of them are accessing the upstream object. All of them are receiving the output of a model applied to it, a model built from different histories, different loops of confirmation, different accumulated mass.

Science handles this through intersubjective agreement. When multiple observers with multiple instruments register the same reading, the grounds for confidence are stronger. But intersubjectivity establishes consensus, not correspondence with anything mind-independent. The consensus could be systematically wrong in ways invisible to all observers simultaneously, because all observers are running the same general cognitive architecture, shaped by the same evolutionary pressures, constrained by the same perceptual range.

Genuine agnosticism about whether an objective, mind-independent reality exists is probably the most honest position available. Still, my perceptions track something. I don't know what. But they clearly produce results. They can make predictions that pan out, find patterns that hold, make models that survive contact with whatever is out there long enough to be useful. That is a working agreement between the apparatus and the world, provisional and pragmatic, more like a truce than a truth. I proceed on that truce.

The Self That Isn't There

David Hume tried to locate himself in 1739. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he described turning his attention inward looking for a self and finding instead only particular perceptions arriving in sequence: a thought, a sensation, an emotion, and a memory surfacing unintentionally. Never a bare self having those experiences. He looked for the observer and found only the observed.

Hume called this the bundle theory. The self is the bundle of experiences, not something that has them. There is no homunculus inside watching the feed. The feed is all there is.

Anatta (non-self) is one of the three marks of existence in Theravada doctrine, and Buddhism arrived at the same conclusion roughly two millennia before Hume. The Pali Canon claims the self is a process mistaken for a thing. What we call "I" is a shifting pattern of thoughts, sensations, memories, and intentions arising and passing in sequence, with no fixed substance running through them. The identification of that pattern as a unified, continuous entity is not a discovery. It is a construction the process performs on itself.

Metzinger claims that the phenomenal self-model is generated in real time by neural processes and rendered as if it were a transparent window onto an actual self. We don't experience the model as a model. We experience it as direct access to what we are, which is why the self feels so obviously real and unified. It is built to feel that way. These models, these representations of the self to itself, are what the self is made of. The substrate, whatever it actually is at the level of neurons and synaptic firing, has no access to itself without the representational layer. A simulation of a self that kept announcing itself as a simulation would be functionally useless for any evolutionary purpose.

Perception, then, generates a model of the world. Part of that model is a model of the perceiver. The self experiences the world-model as reality and experiences itself as the one doing the experiencing. Neither the world as experienced nor the experiencer is the thing-in-itself. Both are constructions the brain runs, mostly beneath any threshold of awareness. The self-model works. It generates predictions, integrates feedback, builds plans, and maintains identity across time with enough coherence for a life to cohere. What holds it together across decades isn't a continuous substance. The mechanism simply keeps running, each pass inheriting the residue of the last, the way a flame stays a flame despite burning entirely different fuel from one moment to the next. Representation works through distinction, each thing known as much by what it excludes as by what it contains. The self knows itself the same way. It

maintains a boundary against what it is not. Survival required a confident, stable sense of selfhood, and the apparatus delivered one built entirely from the inside out.

What the Model Is Running

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981, Jean Baudrillard maps representation moving through four stages across the arc of Western modernity. In the first, images reflect a base reality: a portrait corresponds to a real person, a map to real territory, a word to a thing. In the second, images begin to mask and distort the underlying reality. Propaganda operates here, advertising, spectacle. The image no longer simply reflects; it starts managing what is reflected. In the third stage, images mask the absence of any corresponding reality. Currency backed by nothing represents value that isn't there. News corresponds to events that were staged or composed for the medium. Political speech performs positions never intended to become policy. The image performs the full function that a real referent once carried, but the referent is gone. In the fourth stage, which Baudrillard argued modernity has entered, the image bears no relation to any underlying reality whatsoever. It refers only to other outputs. The copy has no original; this is what Baudrillard calls a simulacrum. The simulacrum has replaced what it was once an image of. By the fourth stage, asking "but what's really happening?" has no

stable answer. The simulacrum is what's happening, and Baudrillard called this condition the hyperreal. The real has been replaced so thoroughly that the replacement no longer refers to anything prior to itself. The hyperreal is more real than real. It is the map that fully ate the territory.

A dollar bill is paper. Its value is not a property of the paper. It is a consensual hallucination, enforced by legal tender laws, backed by the credibility of the institution that issues it, sustained by near-universal confidence that other people will accept it.

People understand this abstractly when it's explained to them. They rarely feel it. They go to work for dollars, pay rent in dollars, measure their life's progress against dollar-denominated benchmarks, and experience the value of dollars as a fact about the world rather than an ongoing social agreement that could end. The simulation is that convincing.

A simulation doesn't have to be accurate to be real. It just has to be stable. It has to recruit enough behavior to produce its own confirmation. The word for this, coined by the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, is hyperstition.

How Fictions Go Hard

The CCRU developed the concept of hyperstition at Warwick University in the late 1990s, in a context that was deliberately strange and deliberately rigorous. A narrative is stated with enough conviction to recruit initial believers. The believers' behavior produces real-world changes that begin to confirm the narrative. The confirmed narrative recruits more believers. More believers produce more behavior. The loop accelerates. When the loop has run long enough, the narrative has generated enough institutional mass that it no longer requires active belief; it requires only the inertia of everyone who has already structured their lives around it.

Every nation-state is a hyperstition that completed this arc. The United States of America was, in July 1776, a claim. There was no continuous political entity by that name. No established government, no recognized borders, no diplomatic standing. There was a declaration signed by fifty-six men, asserting universal human rights on behalf of a country that did not yet exist. People fought and died for the claim. Their institutional descendants built the apparatus the claim described, and now it has nuclear weapons, a Supreme Court,

trillions in national debt, and a credit rating the world takes seriously.

Christianity began as a small Jewish sect in first-century Roman-occupied Judea, spreading through house churches and handwritten letters, recruiting believers through a story about death and resurrection. By 313 CE, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, the story had accumulated enough behavioral weight to reshape a civilization. All it took was enough people acting as though there had been a resurrection, for long enough that acting otherwise became socially and legally dangerous.

Satoshi Nakamoto proposed Bitcoin in a white paper in October 2008. The genesis block was mined in January 2009, at which point one bitcoin was worth nothing. There was no market to price it. By November 2021 the price reached $68,000. That figure measures aggregated belief, weighted by capital committed to that belief. The belief built the price. The price confirmed the belief. Each confirmed belief recruited more capital. And so on. A hyperstition running on decentralized hardware, no single node necessary for the loop to continue.

The law is a hyperstition so thoroughly hardened that most people have forgotten it was ever a fiction. A statute is text. Text has no force by itself. Paper cannot compel behavior. The force derives from the credible threat of enforcement, which derives from the institutional credibility of courts and police, which derives from widespread belief in the legitimacy of the

legal order, which derives from the law's apparent consistency and fairness, which derives from the law. The whole system is recursive. It works because enough people act as though it works, and that acting-as-if produces the working.

The pattern across all of these: assertion, recruitment, confirmation, repetition, hardening. Each cycle makes the simulation denser, raises the cost of defection, makes the question "but is this actually real?" harder to ask because asking it means risking the practical benefits that come from acting as though it is. The loop punishes exits. Loyalty is rewarded because coordinated loyalty is what makes it true.

The Obvious Fake

The simulation sometimes patches itself not by denying the existence of a fake but by pointing at one. Baudrillard used Disneyland to illustrate this. Disneyland presents itself as imaginary, which appears honest. It is explicitly fiction, themed, contained, purchased by the ticket. But its deeper function is to make everything outside its gates feel real by contrast. The real America outside the gates is no more real than what's inside them. Disneyland exists to conceal that the contrast is false, that the real America is also a constructed set of representations feeding on other representations, with no original beneath them. The fiction isn't just Disneyland; the fiction is also the border that supposedly separates Disneyland from reality.

The obviously fake serves the simulation by letting people locate themselves on the right side of a border. "I know what the real thing looks like." "I know that is fake." The act of correctly identifying something as fake generates a felt proximity to the real, without ever requiring an examination of whether the real is real in any sense the obvious fake isn't.

Reality television works exactly this way. It is evidently constructed. Cameras follow people through scenarios that have been selected, shaped, re-shot, and edited to produce an arc. Everyone watching understands this. But the function of that visible artifice is to make scripted drama feel more real by contrast, to let the viewer feel epistemically superior to the person being fooled, and to establish the viewer's sense of accessing something authentic by standing outside the obvious fake.

Consider what happens when a piece of media gets labeled "obvious propaganda" or "clearly manufactured" by a commentator whose own institutional position rests on claims to deliver unmanufactured reality. The debunking confers authority. The act of correctly identifying the fake positions the identifier as a reliable guide to what isn't fake, without requiring any examination of whether the identifier's own framework passed through equivalent scrutiny. The obvious fake is used as a mirror in which the simulation of the real admires itself.

NFTs and the metaverse were labeled, with considerable speed and enthusiasm, as obviously fake value, as empty hype, as tokens backed by nothing. This is true in a narrow sense. But the analysis rarely extended to asking what makes a dollar backed by something. The answer (the collective agreement of enough people with enough stakes in the agreement continuing) is structurally identical to what makes an NFT worth something or nothing. The distinction between the legitimate

asset and the obviously fake one isn't that one has a real referent and the other doesn't. The legitimate asset is the older hyperstition. The obvious fake is the younger one, still mid-loop, with fewer cycles of confirmation behind it.

When the simulation's seams show and the construction becomes visible in a way that threatens the whole edifice, the simulation can shore up its structure by surfacing the seams, pointing at them loudly, and using that exposure to reassert that the rest holds. "Look at this obviously fake thing over here. Now don't you feel confident about what's real?!" The move appears across every institutional and ideological affiliation without exception.

The Reality Brokers

The desire for an objective reality, a ground that holds regardless of who's looking, is nearly universal across cultures and historical periods. Science is organized around it. Law assumes it. Religion promises access to it. Philosophy, in most of its traditions, treats it as the goal. People want to know what's really true, what's really happening, what things really mean beneath the surface appearances. The pressure is so consistent and so intense that it looks like recognition of an actual feature of the world.

Nietzsche asked this question in an essay written in 1873. What is the truth-drive actually for? What does the organism gain from insisting that its models correspond to an external world? Most philosophy before him had asked how to achieve correspondence. Nietzsche stepped outside that frame and asked who benefits from it. His answer: organisms that built shared representations had advantages over organisms that didn't. Language extended those representations across time and distance. Shared models enabled cooperation at scales that individual perception never could. "Truth" in this genealogical reading is the name given to representations stable enough to

support that coordination, not a property of propositions that correspond to mind-independent reality. The drive toward truth is the drive toward coordination.

This matters for understanding the simulation. If the hunger for objective truth is itself a product of the apparatus rather than evidence of something beyond it, then the entire edifice built on that hunger sits on the same uncertain ground as everything else.

Baudrillard noticed that in the simulation's later stages, the production of reality becomes the primary activity of power. Whoever controls what registers as real controls everything downstream. What counts as evidence, what counts as legitimate, what counts as possible. The insistence on objective truth is a political act as much as an epistemological one. It draws a border between what's inside the real and what's outside it, and that border is always maintained by someone with an interest in where it falls.

At the level of daily cultural function, science operates as an institution with funding structures, publication hierarchies, credentialing systems, peer review norms, and replication crises, all of which shape what questions get asked, what methods count as legitimate, and what findings survive long enough to enter the textbooks. The methods work far better than alternatives for the specific classes of problems they're designed to address. "Science says" functions in contemporary discourse the way "God says" functioned in medieval Europe. It is an appeal to a legitimating authority whose own

foundations are rarely examined in the same breath as the conclusions being drawn from them.

When institutions built on claims of objectivity are caught failing on their own terms and the gap between the claim and the lived reality of the institution widens enough that people start feeling it, the pressure mounts to reassert the ground. Something has to come in and restabilize the story. New institutions form. Old ones retrench and intensify their claims to correspondence with the real. The simulation hardens against the chaos by generating more simulation, at higher resolution, with more confident claims to have finally gotten beneath the surface.

Religion is this process at civilizational scale. When the contingency of meaning becomes unbearable, the demand for a ground that holds regardless of human agreement produces systems that claim access to precisely that. The god is the ultimate simulacrum. It is a representation of a ground that generates its own referent through being treated as real, across enough generations that the treating-as-real becomes structural, becomes the built environment of the culture, becomes what children are born into before they can evaluate it.

Every ideological system that presents itself as finally having gotten to the bottom of things follows the same arc. Marxism's claim to scientific materialism. Libertarianism's claim to natural rights. Neoliberalism's claim to the neutrality of market outcomes. Each offers a way to stop the regress of

interpretation. The offer is accepted by people tired of uncertain terrain. The acceptance fuels the loop. The loop, run long enough, hardens what was once an argument into an identity, and an identity into an unquestionable given, and an unquestionable given into something for which people will die and kill.

The Necessary Fiction

Simulations are necessary. Not just contingently useful. Necessary. Without them, the human project doesn't function at a level above small-band cooperation, and even small-band cooperation requires shared representations that are, in the relevant sense, simulations.

Without the shared fiction that certain tokens or numbers represent value, there is no trade beyond immediate barter. No specialization. No supply chains. No cities. No hospitals. No surgery. No antibiotics. The simulation of monetary value is the infrastructure on which everything else sits, and it does not matter that it is a simulation. The surgery is equally real whether you paid for it in dollars or in livestock. The simulation of value is the mechanism that made the surgery available. Dissolving the simulation doesn't make the surgery more real. It just makes the surgery inaccessible.

Without the shared fiction that certain texts bind behavior across time and context, there is no contract. No property. No corporation. No court system to adjudicate disputes without violence. No protection for the individual against the group, or the weak against the powerful. Legal systems are riddled

with constructed fictions (legal personhood, corporate identity, the reasonable person standard, the social contract itself) and yet every protection they provide is real in its consequences. The person wrongly imprisoned is really imprisoned. The person protected from wrongful imprisonment is really protected.

Words are representations of things, and they slip, and they carry cultural freight, and the same word in two mouths can mean different things, and none of them map perfectly onto what they name. And yet language is the medium in which thought reaches its most complex forms, in which ideas can be preserved across centuries, in which one mind can change another. Without the simulation of shared meaning, this sentence doesn't reach you.

The person who successfully dissolves every simulation simply becomes incapacitated. They cannot sign a lease because property rights are a fiction. They cannot keep an appointment because time is a social construct. They cannot maintain a relationship because identity is a shifting pattern with no fixed self beneath it. They cannot work because currency is a collective agreement and the agreement's validity is indeterminate. Every practical action presupposes that the relevant simulation holds for the duration of the action. To act at all is to treat some simulations as real, provisionally, and to act within their logic.

Simulations are the medium of human life. Fish are not living in a corrupted version of the world because water is their

element. Water is the environment in which fish-life is possible. Simulations are the environment in which human social life is possible. The question is never whether to inhabit simulations. The question is which ones to inhabit, how consciously, and at what cost.

When They Harden Too Far

The necessity of simulations is also the source of their danger. What makes them load-bearing is what makes them capable of becoming totalizing. When a simulation hardens past the point of any possible revision, it starts being a cage.

When "truth" is not a provisional consensus arrived at through ongoing inquiry but a fixed set of claims that a particular institution has the authority to pronounce and defend, then challenging those claims becomes a moral transgression. Heresy is the word religious institutions use for this. Disinformation is the word media institutions use for this. The structural function is to place certain claims beyond the reach of examination by treating examination as an attack on the institution's legitimacy.

Every institution that achieves enough mass eventually develops this property. The Catholic Church burned Giordano Bruno in 1600 for asserting that the universe might be infinite and contain other worlds. The simulation had hardened to the point where its own claims were indistin-

guishable, from the inside, from reality itself. To challenge the claim was to challenge reality. And that is unacceptable.

Lysenkoism, the agricultural ideology promoted by Trofim Lysenko between the 1930s and 1960s in the USSR, rejected Mendelian genetics on ideological grounds. Genetics was deemed too bourgeois in its implications. Scientists who disagreed were imprisoned or executed. The simulation of Marxist scientific materialism had hardened to the point where empirical results that contradicted its conclusions were treated as direct political threats. Soviet crop yields suffered catastrophically. People starved. The price of a fully hardened simulation, when it's wrong about something that matters, is paid in real bodies.

The relentless irony is that this hardening always presents itself from the inside as defending truth. The conviction that you're defending something real and important is exactly what a simulation generates when it's under pressure. That feeling is evidence the simulation has done its job.

Living Inside It

You understand the simulation is running. The self perceiving it is itself a model. The institutions, currencies, laws, and identities you move through were stories before they were facts, and they became facts by being treated as facts long enough. The simulations are necessary. They are also dangerous. You cannot dissolve them and you cannot trust them completely. What does this change about how you live?

Camus got closest to the right response in 1942. His essay on Sisyphus is usually read for its existential register, the clash between human desire for meaning and a universe that provides none. The part I find more useful is present in the question: how do you act with clarity in a situation you cannot exit? Sisyphus cannot put the boulder down. He cannot change the hill. What he retains is his orientation to the situation. He can own it entirely or be destroyed by resentment of it. Camus says we must imagine him happy. He means it as a precise description of what freedom looks like when all external sources of it have been removed. Whether the imagining itself is chosen or simply what happens next doesn't change what it produces.

Before entering any institution, any belief system, any social arrangement worth sustained commitment, ask what it takes and what it returns. Every hyperstition has a transaction at its core. A religion takes belief and behavioral conformity and returns ritual, community, and social protection. Bitcoin takes capital and attention and returns a hedge against currency debasement and the identity of being ahead of a historical curve. Neither of these transactions is fraudulent by definition. Entering them without seeing the transaction is how people get written by systems rather than writing themselves.

The most intellectually dangerous people I've encountered are not the ones holding wrong views; they're the ones who've stopped running the update function entirely. Their model generates predictions, those predictions fail, and they interpret the failure as evidence that the world is wrong. The cognitive move that makes this possible is the fusion of identity with belief. If the model is wrong then I am wrong, and I cannot be wrong, so the model is right. This is how loops capture people completely. Belief becomes sealed, and sealed belief generates its own confirmation and ignores everything else.

You can act inside a simulation without ratifying it as ultimate reality. You can use dollars without treating their value as metaphysically guaranteed. You can participate in an institution's story without treating the story as beyond examination. The person who can no longer locate the difference between "I act as if this is true because it's useful"

and “this is simply true” has been captured. The loop runs them now.

The response to understanding that meaning is constructed is to construct it deliberately. Waiting for meaning that arrives independently of any construction is waiting for something that doesn’t exist. You build, or you drift in what other people built, running on maps you didn’t draw and barely examined, if at all.

You are a model generating a model of the world, building things inside a simulation, with no guarantee that any of it corresponds to anything outside the system you’re running in. The construction feels real to you. Its durability is uncertain. The universe will not confirm or deny your assessment of how it went. Spending a life waiting for a cosmic sign-off that will not arrive, that is the tragedy.

Simulations All the Way Down

The argument running through these sections (that reality is constructed, that the self is a model, that institutions harden fictions into facts by recruiting behavior, that the pressure for objective truth is itself a mechanism of the simulation, that simulations are necessary and dangerous and inescapable) is itself a simulation. It has been assembled from selected thinkers, organized to produce a particular rhetorical arc, offered with enough apparent rigor that you might treat it as an account of something real rather than one more claim competing for the status of real.

Every concept deployed here (hyperstition, the phenomenal self-model, the four stages of the simulacrum, Hume's bundle, *Anatta*, the genealogy of truth) is a representation of a representation. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum is itself a simulacrum. The CCRU's concept of hyperstition is itself a hyperstition. If you now walk around thinking in terms of "loops hardening" and "simulations recruiting behavior," the CCRU's fiction has successfully recruited your behavior. The loop runs on me when I use the vocabulary without re-examining who gave it to me and what they were building.

The thinkers cited here as authorities are not transparent windows onto truth. They are nodes in a particular intellectual tradition, selected from an enormous landscape of competing traditions, weighted toward European philosophy with specific cultural and historical blind spots, read through translations, filtered through secondary literature, processed by a mind with its own apparatus problem. The authority claimed by citing them is itself a form of credibility transfer.

And now I am making a claim about this very essay, which is another recursive layer. The meta-awareness performed here (look, I see what I'm doing; I'm telling you I see what I'm doing) is itself a rhetorical move. It might create the impression of unusual honesty, which would be a form of credibility building, which would be the simulation using the self-exposure as another recruitment mechanism. I cannot step outside this. The regress does not bottom out.

If you find this convincing, you are a simulation registering that another simulation has given you better tools for moving through a world of simulations. If you find it unconvincing, your resistance is itself a simulation protecting its existing models against a claim that would require revision. There is no view from outside. There is no neutral response. Every engagement with the argument is the argument confirming itself or the competing simulation defending its ground. This is the vertigo this essay is trying to describe, and it cannot be described without inducing it.

Every attempt to reach ground produces another layer of representation. Every claim to finally see the mechanism clearly is a new mechanism claiming to see. The map draws the territory, and then a new map draws the map, and the maps go down as far as anyone has ever looked, and there is no evidence they stop.

This leaves you in exactly the position Camus described: inside a situation you cannot exit, holding tools that are useful without being certain, building things that are real without being final, making claims that matter without being guaranteed. The self doing the building is a simulation. The meaning assigned to the building is constructed. The world the building happens in is a model.

The building still happens. The claims still matter. The loops are still worth tracking. The simulations are still worth choosing carefully, entering consciously, and never, ever treating as the thing itself.

The simulation holds.

So does the one running inside it.

And the one running inside that.

The Street Finds Its Own Uses

I HAVE BEEN OBSESSED with cyberpunk for many years. It is my first and most consistent intellectual and aesthetic home. I've never fully understood why.

Writing the essay you just read and then spending days talking it through, having it reflected back to me, something clicked that I hadn't seen before.

Working through Baudrillard and Metzinger and the CCRU and questions about reality and the self and what truth actually is, it is almost beat for beat the foundational architecture of the cyberpunk literary genre.

The essay opens by arguing that everything you have ever experienced arrived through an apparatus, that perception is not detection, that the model you're running can't be verified against reality from inside itself.

Cyberpunk built an entire genre around this. Characters live inside representations and know it and cannot get out. The apparatus is the setting. The neon is artificial light in place of natural light, signs literally suspended in the air, representations of illumination rather than illumination itself.

Augmentation is the process of replacing the hardware while keeping the process running, and the genre's central question, where does the human end and the machine begin, is the essay's question about what the self actually is rendered

as something you can open with a scalpel. The chrome is the representational layer. Below it is the thing-in-itself that Kant said we never encounter.

Cyberpunk has been asking the identity question since its inception, asking what remains of you when your body is augmented past recognition, when memory can be edited and sold. The genre's answer has always been that you are a pattern, a process, something that persists because the mechanism keeps running, the flame staying a flame despite burning entirely different fuel from one moment to the next.

Baudrillard's four stages of the simulacrum map directly onto the cyberpunk cityscape. Images move from reflecting reality, to distorting it, to masking its absence, until in the fourth stage there is no reality left to mask and the image refers only to other images. The cyberpunk megacity is the fourth stage. Corporate logos the size of buildings. News indistinguishable from entertainment indistinguishable from the product.

The hyperreal, more real than real, the map that ate the territory, is literally the built environment. Characters navigate it the way the essay describes navigating any simulation: they can't get outside it or verify what lies beneath it, so they proceed on truce.

The genre also understands the obvious fake. Cyberpunk worlds are layered with visible fakery, the street knockoffs that make the corporate originals seem legitimate, the propaganda

so crude it functions as cover for the subtler manipulation running underneath.

Every time a cyberpunk character sneers at the cheap corporate simulacrum, they anchor themselves to their concept of the real, which is itself a managed category. The genre knows this. The best cyberpunk doesn't let the protagonist's sense of authenticity go unexamined. The street has its own simulations.

The vertical geography of the cyberpunk city makes literal what the essay argues about power. Whoever controls what registers as real controls everything downstream, and in cyberpunk that control is architectural. The towers above the weather, above the street noise, above the obvious fakery at ground level. The megacorporations hold epistemic power alongside economic power. They define what counts as news, what counts as legal, what counts as possible. The protagonist who moves between towers and street can see both levels simultaneously, and that is the position the essay's practical section tries to put the reader in. Inside the simulation, aware of it, unable to exit, proceeding anyway.

The megacorporation is a hyperstition that completed the loop. It began as a piece of paper asserting that this collective of people and assets would be treated as a single entity. The claim recruited capital. The capital built infrastructure. The infrastructure recruited more capital. The loop ran long enough that the fiction generated enough institutional mass to outlast the governments that chartered it, to write the laws

that regulated it, to become more durable than any of the people inside it.

The corporation in cyberpunk doesn't need a villain at its head. The loop runs itself. The humans inside it are substrate, exactly as the essay describes every institution that has hardened past the point of revision. Push hard enough against that hardened simulation and the enforcement arrives. Literally. Cyberpunk shows you what the cage looks like from inside when you try to exit through the wall.

The genre's dystopia is completion. It's a loop so dense that defection is structurally foreclosed.

The cyberpunk protagonist proceeds anyway. Builds meaning inside the simulation knowing it is constructed, navigates by maps known to be wrong at the edges, acts within the logic of a system known to be fiction.

That is the absurdist response the essay arrives at through Camus. Enter knowing the transaction, hold the distinction between acting as if something is true because it's useful and ratifying it as simply true, because the person who loses that distinction gets written by the system rather than writing themselves.

Every cyberpunk story is about someone trying to hold that distinction in an environment specifically engineered to collapse it, in a world where the simulation is so total and so deeply installed that most people cannot locate the seam between the map and the territory because the seam was paved over before they were born.

The genre has always known that the simulation is necessary. Even in the most dystopian cyberpunk worlds, the characters need the net, the currency, the fictions that make collective life possible. The question was never whether to inhabit simulations but which ones and how consciously and at what cost.

The essay ends by turning on itself, admitting it is also a simulation. Cyberpunk does the same thing. The genre is fiction that knows it is fiction, that uses the knowing as part of the argument, that builds worlds so self-aware of their own constructedness that the reader cannot sit comfortably outside the frame. The genre implicates you. It always has.

The street finds its own uses. The maps can be redrawn by the people navigating them.

That is the essay. That has always been cyberpunk. I just didn't know I was reading philosophy.

Dylan Allman

Sources

The essay names its sources as it goes. Fuller coordinates for the curious.

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simulation, *passim*

A Note on the Type

This book is set in EB Garamond, a twenty-first-century revival drawn from a specimen sheet printed in Frankfurt in 1592, thirty years after the death of Claude Garamont, the Parisian punchcutter whose letters it collects. For much of the twentieth century the types sold under his name were copies of someone else's work entirely, cut sixty years after his death by Jean Jannon and misattributed until 1926. The letters you have been reading are a copy of a copy, four and a half centuries deep, with no original behind them.

Each copy is printed the moment someone asks for it. There is no stack in a warehouse, no first printing to run out. Only copies, summoned one at a time.

On the cover, eight gates recede at a fixed ratio. The deepest stands exactly on the horizon.

The simulation holds.

Erratum: for “world,” read “model,” throughout.

The simulation holds.

So does the one running inside it.

And the one running inside that.

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